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MANHUNT

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JOHN MCLOUD, Editor
CHAS. W. ADAMS, Art Director

HAL WALKER, Managing Editor
R. E. DECKER, Business Manager

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THEY thought they were through talking, but as far as I was concerned they'd just started.

"I'll have to know more," I said. "Especially the Why."

The man in the gray pin-stripe spoke. "I don't think that's necessary," he said.

"I haven't said I'll take the job," I reminded him.

The three of them shifted in their chairs and tried to come to an agreement with their eyes: the pin-stripe, the small olive-skinned man, and the big man who'd been eating too well for fifteen years.

I pointed to the man in the pin-stripe. "You start it off," I said.

My Game, My Rules

BY JACK RITCHIE

*Without the girl, it would have been a simple job.
But Johnny couldn't get the girl out of his mind . . .*

They exchanged glances again, and then he sighed and got up. He was the kind of man who made after-dinner speeches and he had to get up when he talked.

"My name is Frederick Harlow," he said.

I shook my head. "No," I said. "You're Marcus Whitney Adrian."

His mouth sagged slightly and he had to look at the other two again.

"I lived in this town once," I said. "Everybody knows Marcus Whitney Adrian."

They thought about it, and then the man who liked food too much said, "Go ahead, Adrian. He probably knows, anyway. I thought his face was familiar."

This one was Sergeant Matt Hogan of the Sixth Precinct. A few years ago he had been Chief of Police Hogan.

Adrian shrugged his shoulders. "Very well, then. As you say, everyone knows me." He frowned at how to begin. "This has always been a clean city. . . ."

Hogan opened heavy lids. "Never mind the crap. Get to the point."

"All right," Adrian said irritably. "The point. The point is Bull Moberg."

The olive-skinned man, smiling quietly to himself, was Gino Cosmo. "Good old Bull Moberg," he said.

Adrian ignored him. "Moberg is an ignorant lout from what is commonly referred to as the other side of the tracks."

"Adrian's Row," Cosmo said,

amiably. "Shacks, tenements, no culture, and high rents."

Adrian turned angrily. "The rents are in line with costs, and the houses are perfectly sound. Certainly better than those Bohunks and Da — those immigrants had where they came from."

Hogan stirred. "Lay off, Cosmo. You're making Adrian nervous, and you know he can't concentrate on two things at the same time." He lit a big cigar. "What Adrian's getting to is that he owns half the ground anybody walks on in this burg. Moberg's making him kick in a couple of hundred grand a year for protection."

Adrian was trembling with indignation now. "Moberg," he said, "threatened to have my houses condemned and torn down unless I agreed to pay him what he calls a 'percentage'."

He brought out a handkerchief and wiped his palms. "At first I refused to pay. I still have certain friends in the Judiciary. But then a lot of my houses began to catch fire, and the fire trucks always developed flat tires or got there too late. I've been paying ever since."

I looked over at Gino Cosmo, still smiling to himself. "What's *your* problem, Cosmo?" I asked.

"I see you know me, too," he said. He brought out a silver cigarette case and extracted a king-size. "Then you probably know I run a few places around town. Gambling houses, joints — places like that."

He lit the cigarette. "I liked Bull Moberg, and I was the one who gave him his first job. I stuffed him into an over-size tux and used him to scare the complainers."

He paused for a minute. "Yes," he said, thoughtfully. "Moberg is an impressive boy. Big and tough."

That touched something in Hogan. "If I was twenty years younger he wouldn't look so tough. I've cut his kind down to kindling before."

Cosmo eyed Hogan's stomach. "Just fall on him now. That's all you'd have to do."

They stared at each other for a moment, and then Cosmo cleared the smoke from his nostrils and went on. "Bull was a good boy. He was useful and he came up fast. In five years he was my right hand. A brother. Even a friend."

Cosmo ground out the cigarette. "And then one pretty night I came to work and Bull was sitting in my chair with his feet on the mahogany."

He reflected on it sadly and then resumed the smile. "You notice I smile a lot," he said. "That's because I've got good teeth. Also there are times when I can't do anything else.

"And so I smiled and he smiled and he kept his feet where they were. We had a new administration."

Cosmo showed his good teeth. "We're still friends," he said softly. "I get invited to his headquarters regularly for a drink, a look at his swanky furniture, and a peek or two at his dame."

"Her name is Helen," Cosmo said. His eyes hazed and his smile was envious. "If those blue eyes were for me, I wouldn't mind the seventy-five grand Bull costs me each year."

Not blue, I thought with sudden bitterness. *Violet*.

It was Hogan's turn now. He put a match to the dead end of his cigar and got it going. "If you know the others, you know me.

"Bull Moberg is just a small-time punk who got lucky. I knew he was growing and I figured to slap him down when he got too big. But I'm not the worrying type and I let it go until it was too late."

He chewed his cigar, remembering. "When I saw how things were — when I woke up and saw that he had the administration in his pocket — I was plenty willing to cooperate. But Moberg had other ideas and other men. Since then he's had me sitting in the Sixth sorting traffic tickets all day."

He took the cigar from his mouth. "Now you know everything."

The three of them sat expectantly and watched for me to talk.

"Moberg's got an organization," I said.

"Sure," Hogan said. "But he picked his own boys, and not for brains. Without Moberg, the organization won't last twenty-four hours." His eyes lit up. "The old days will come back. Adrian handles the property, Cosmo helps the citizens get rid of their dough, and I see that everybody stays in line. Every-

thing under control. Just like a three-decker sandwich."

Cosmo leaned forward in his chair. "There isn't anyone we can really depend on in this city. That's why we've had to send for you."

The three pairs of eyes focused on me and waited.

I let them stew while I tasted my drink. "All right," I said. "You're all nice people, and you've convinced me. I'll take the job."

The first part of my job is always to find out a man's routine, if he has one. You've got to be able to depend on it that a man will be at the same place at least once during every day. If you're lucky, it'll be at the same time.

At one o'clock the next afternoon, I parked about a hundred yards from the entrance of the Lake Crest where Bull had a penthouse apartment.

I lazed until four o'clock until Bull came striding out of the place. He was trailed by two muscle men who kept a couple of steps behind him.

A dark-blue chauffeur-driven Cadillac pulled up to the curb and Bull and his friends got in. I put my car into gear and kept a careful block behind.

Moberg made almost a dozen stops in the next four hours. It looked like he was checking his operations to make sure everybody was happy and paying.

At eight-thirty, he picked up Helen. I'd known about that, of course, for a couple of years now.

There are always some smiling friends who let you know when something like that happens.

They dined leisurely at the Merrill House and then at ten they moved on to the Green Cockade, where everything costs the best.

Because I was hired for it, I paid some attention to Bull. He was big, plenty big, over two-fifty and carrying enough of that in the shoulders not to be bothered by it. His heavy face liked to roar with laughter and it liked to eat and drink.

And because I'd never gotten her out of my mind, I watched Helen too. Her eyes were the remembered violet, glistening violet. Her honey-blond hair shimmered with each movement.

I was at the bar at the far end of the main room when she saw me. Our eyes held for seconds, and then she looked away. She kept her eyes on her hands for a long time before Bull said something sufficiently funny so that she could smile.

She came to the bar after a while.

"Hello, Johnny," she said quietly. "I made excuses, but I can only stay a minute."

"That's plenty," I said. It wasn't easy to say. She had been twenty when I left, and now she was four years lovelier.

Her face was expressionless. "Did you come back for anything?" she asked. "Perhaps you forgot something?"

"Just passing through," I said. "Having fun?"

Her eyes met mine. "Lots," she said.

"It's a living, anyway," I said.

She bit her lower lip. "I'm untouchable now. Is that it?"

I signalled the bartender for a refill. "I wouldn't say that," I told her. "Try to keep awake after Bull leaves your place tonight. Maybe I'll come up and — say hello."

"I'll be too tired," she said, her face white. She walked quickly away.

Bull took her back to her apartment at one-thirty. His two gorillas waited in the car, and Bull was back out at four.

I slept late the next day, but, by the time Bull was ready to make his rounds, I was waiting for him in my car. The routine was the same as the previous day, and Bull and Helen were at the Green Cockade at nine.

I was at the bar again when she came to me.

"I know you're not following me," she said. "What do you want here?"

"I'm here for a drink," I said.

She put her hand on my arm, but then pulled it back. "If it's Bull, be careful."

"Worried about me?" I asked.

"Why shouldn't I be?"

I looked over at the ringside table. "I figured you stopped worrying when you took up with Moberg . . ."

Her face was white again. "I waited two years," she said. "You never even wrote."

The bitterness was gone from inside me, suddenly, because I knew she was right — or, anyway, as right as I was. "I was waiting to raise a stake," I said. "The trouble is, I'm still waiting. You'd better go back to your table."

They left for her apartment at two, and I settled down outside for the hours to pass. But Bull was out again in twenty minutes, and from the way he slammed the door, he wasn't happy. It looked as though Helen wasn't in a cooperative mood.

I let his car disappear while I smoked another cigarette. Then I got out of the car and went up to her apartment.

She wore a black nylon robe, small-netted and transparent. It was held together at her breasts with the sparkle of a diamond pin.

She stood in the doorway with one hand on the doorknob. "If it's just this once, I don't want you here."

"My plans aren't definite yet," I said. "You want me to go?"

"You don't back up an inch, do you, Johnny? It has to be your way or not at all."

"I make the rules," I said. "Always."

She was silent, watching my face. Then she turned and walked back into the room, leaving the door open. "No," she said quietly. "I don't want you to go."

She waited for me and I put my arms around her. Her lips were warm with hunger, and she held me very

tight. My hands went over her, and when I let her go, she unfastened the diamond clip and the cloth slithered off her shoulders and was a black mist on the floor.

She was mine for now, and I knew that she had never wanted it any other way.

The next morning, I drove to Bull Moberg's hotel and walked to the entrance. I stood there looking up and down the street until I found what I wanted.

It was at the end of the block and across the street: a red brick five-story hotel called the Cary House.

I checked out of my own hotel and got a third floor room with a view of Bull's hotel at the Cary House. I had my suitcase taken up to the room while I had dinner in the Grill downstairs. Then I killed time at the bar until about twenty to four.

Upstairs in my room, I put the suitcase on the bed and opened it.

I began getting ready to do the thing the three of them had hired me for.

I assembled the pieces of the carbine and fitted the silencer. I opened the window, lit a cigarette, and waited for Bull Moberg.

At five after four, Bull and his two shadows came out of the wide doors of the Shore Crest. I ground out my cigarette and rested my elbow on the window sill.

The Cadillac pulled up to the curb. Bull began walking toward it.

I squeezed the trigger. The gun made no more noise than a rubber band snapped against a wall.

Bull Moberg took one more step and then he fell.

I closed the window and wiped away my fingerprints. The carbine was broken down and went back into the suitcase.

I put on my hat, picked up the suitcase, stopped to use a handkerchief on the doorknob, and then went out into the corridor.

I was in my car behind the Cary House three minutes after Bull died. In another twenty minutes I was outside the city limits and relaxed for the two-hour drive back to Chicago.

I wondered what kind of a scramble my clients would get into back there. I wondered whether they would return to the three-decker sandwich or whether one of them was big enough to step into Bull's shoes.

Not Adrian. He didn't have the guts for it and his line was more respectable, like rent gouging and slum profiteering.

It wouldn't be Matt Hogan either. That fat wasn't all belly. And he was getting old. His limit was being a crooked cop.

Cosmo was the best bet, but not a good one. He had it up there, but that smile got in the way. It made him too ready to be a good loser.

No. None of them had it. It took the three of them just to get up nerve enough to hire me.

I thought about the payment in my suitcase and I smiled until I thought higher.

I thought about the seventy-five grand Bull took from Cosmo, and the two hundred G's Adrian cried about each year.

I thought about those things and I thought about violet eyes and honey-blonde hair.

Bull was gone now and his machine would collapse because there was no one strong enough to take over.

Power, money, and soft blonde hair.

I slowed the car to a crawl and waited for an open spot in the traffic lane.

I made a U-turn and drove back.

